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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 000720

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTIONS MARKED BY LOW TURNOUT, RULING
PARTY DOMINATION

REF: A. CAIRO 389
[1](#)B. CAIRO 448
[1](#)C. CAIRO 495
[1](#)D. CAIRO 677
[1](#)E. CAIRO 693
[1](#)F. CAIRO 715

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The April 8 elections for 52,000 local council seats were marked by dramatically low turnout, a result of the usual apathy of the Egyptian electorate combined with the call for a boycott by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Embassy officers observing the elections nationwide saw numerous near-empty polling stations juxtaposed with queues of Egyptians lining up to buy subsidized bread - a poignant manifestation of the citizenry's current priorities. The official results and voter turnout figures have not yet been released by the government. However, in an election where the National Democratic Party (NDP) candidates were running unopposed in approximately 90 percent of the races, the ruling party's domination of the local councils is a foregone conclusion. Oppositionists we encountered outside polling stations complained bitterly not only about election day fraud, but also about the flawed candidate registration process, which resulted in a total of only 962 opposition candidates being on the ballot country-wide. Many of the 13,640 election observers supported by USAID and MEPI grants reported harassment from security forces, and deemed the overall environment for observers as "hostile." Elections were held in all of Egypt's governorates, despite court orders halting polling in six provinces until thousands of MB-affiliated candidates who had been blocked from registering were put on the ballot. Between 800-1000 MB supporters who were arrested in the run-up to the elections reportedly remain in detention. End summary.

DRAMATICALLY LOW TURNOUT

[1](#)2. (SBU) Even in a country infamous for abysmal levels of electoral participation, the lack of voters on April 8 was striking. Our unscientific but educated estimate is that voter turnout did not exceed 3 or 4 percent of the electorate. (Note: As a basis for comparison, civil society groups estimated voter turnout in the June 2007 Shura council elections ranged between 1-6 percent, while the government figure was 31 percent. End note). Nine Embassy teams, dispersed nationwide, observed mainly empty polling stations and ballot boxes. Many bystanders we queried were not even aware that the local elections were taking place, or snickered when we mentioned the polling, commenting, "What is

the point of voting? Everyone knows already what the results will be." Combined with minimal election-related signage (normally, Egyptian towns are plastered with posters and banners for various candidates around election time), the negligible turnout and general lack of interest turned the local elections into a non-event.

13. (C) The low turnout is likely the result of the usual apathy of the Egyptian electorate, combined with the MB's call for a boycott after all but 20 MB candidates were knocked off the ballot (ref E), topped by a prevailing sense of "why bother" given that the vast majority of the races were contested only by NDP candidates. The backdrop of the previous day's rioting in the Nile Delta town of Mahalla (ref F) was felt in nearby provinces, with poll workers anxiously assuring us that all was well in their cities.

BITTERNESS AND FRAUD

14. (SBU) There were widespread reports of fraud, with ballot box stuffing by the ruling party and/or poll officials, and bribing of voters seemingly common. Despite court orders that elections in at least six provinces (out of Egypt's 26 governorates) should be halted until thousands of MB-affiliated candidates who had been blocked from registering were put on the ballot (ref D), the elections in all governorates nonetheless moved forward. The coordinator of the Egyptian Association for Supporting Democratic Development, a monitoring group supported in part by USAID, confirmed that none of the court rulings were implemented.

15. (SBU) Out of the approximately 13,640 USG-supported

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elections monitors deployed countrywide (12,700 deployed by three USAID-financed observer groups, and 940 by a MEPI-supported organization), all groups reported that their observers encountered difficulties including harassment by security forces and plainclothes thugs, and observers getting forcibly removed from polling stations. They deemed the general environment for observers as "hostile," and reported that at least twelve credentialed election observers were detained by police.

16. (C) We were approached outside various polling stations in the Delta province of Gharbiya by several candidates from the opposition Wafd party and their supporters, who complained bitterly not only about election day violations ("Wafd voters are not being allowed to cast their ballots, as security officials are saying their names are not on the voter lists"), but also about the flawed candidate registration process (refs C and D). One Wafd candidate told us he had camped outside the registration office for 10 days before finally being allowed to register. Another Wafd candidate, a dignified lawyer in Tanta, told us that the "real scandal" is that the MB had not been allowed to participate: "The MB is very popular here, far more than the NDP or the Wafd party. Their candidates should have dominated the ballot, and as a supporter of democracy, even though I am not a supporter of the MB, I say it is a travesty that no MB candidates were allowed on the ballot." We observed one candidate from the opposition socialist Tagammu party in Zagazig being trailed by a vanful of State Security officers, in an apparent tactic of intimidation. In a clear violation of the constitutional ban on mixing religion and politics, we saw several signs for NDP candidates that featured Koranic verses.

17. (C) A few people, who identified themselves either as aspiring MB candidates or MB supporters, approached us to vent about the registration process that had resulted in "this charade you see before you today - can this even be called an election?" At one Cairo polling station, an independent candidate and his supporters told us that the ruling party was busying people in to vote, and claimed that

turnout was otherwise almost non-existent at that location. At another Cairo stop, an NDP supporter told us, "No matter which candidates win more votes, the NDP candidates will win. I am with the NDP because I want to live (and they can give me the benefits I need)."

LIKELY RESULTS

¶18. (C) The elections, originally scheduled for 2006, but delayed two years in order to give the government some breathing space after the MB's gains in the 2005 parliamentary elections, will clearly meet the NDP's goal of continued domination of Egypt's local councils. The day before polling, the government press agency announced that elections would be held for only 30 percent of the 52,000 local council seats nationwide, as NDP candidates were running unopposed for the other 70 percent of the seats. Given the previously published figures that only a combined total of 962 opposition candidates would be on the ballot (ref D), it seems unlikely that the NDP had opponents in more than 10 percent of the races (and that is a generous estimate). Presumably there were independents running, but in the numerous polling stations we visited, very few were actually on the ballot.

¶19. (SBU) In an April 8 interview on Arab satellite channel "Al Arabiyah," MB Supreme Guide Mahdi Akef called the elections a "towering charade," noting that "We have 600 court verdicts to stop these elections (in various provinces), and 6,000 verdicts to include our candidates on the ballot, but the government did not obey any of these judicial orders We tell the people these elections are a sham, and we will continue to fight legally to annul them."

BREAD LINES LONGER THAN VOTING LINES

¶10. (C) The juxtaposition of near-empty polling stations across the street from lengthy queues of Egyptians lining up by the hundreds to buy subsidized bread potentially symbolizes the citizenry's priorities. Embassy teams observed this poignant scene in towns nationwide. Another striking commentary on Egyptian society was the prevalence of segregated polling stations - at almost all the sites we visited outside of Cairo, men and women voted in separate locations. We were told that such split facilities were a

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fairly recent innovation, introduced over the past few years; certainly, the segregated sites appeared more prevalent than we saw in the 2005 and 2007 elections. Combined with the official placards we observed hanging outside of numerous Delta-area public schools, advising girls, "Wear the veil, so you are ready for Judgment Day," it is clear that the government may be able to physically block the MB from contesting elections, but that Egyptian society and norms are becoming ever more socially conservative.

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